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ABSTRACT

This preliminary study of 20 contemporary realistic fiction books for youth, in middle school and above, analyzed images of poverty using a framework adapted from the work of Robert Leahy. Findings are related to demographics, images of poverty and emerging themes. Results indicate that, as a whole, the sample of books rely on concrete images of poverty yet do not adequately represent current demographics for people living in poverty in the United States. Suggestions are made for teachers, school librarians and media specialists to use these books with students. Appendices include coding categories adapted from Leahy, a list of selection sources for children's and young adult literature and a list of the fiction titles studied. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/MES)

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Images of Poverty in Contemporary Realistic Fiction for Youth

Preliminary Results of a Content Analysis Using a Social Psychological Conceptual Framework

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This preliminary study of 20 contemporary realistic fiction books for youth in middle school and above, analyzed images of poverty using a framework adapted from Leahy (1981, 1983). Findings indicate that, as a whole, the books in this sample rely on concrete images of poverty and do not adequately represent current demographic data for people living in poverty in the United States. The paper concludes with suggestions for how teachers and school librarians/media specialists can use these books with students.

Introduction

The incidence of poverty among children is staggering. Even in a time of national economic prosperity as evidenced throughout the 1990s, almost 20% of all children in the United States under the age of 18 live in poverty (U.S. Census, 1997). In addition, one child in three spends at least one year in poverty during his or her lifetime and for more than 5% of these children, poverty lasts ten years or more (Children and Poverty, 1997).

There are various suggestions for how to reduce child poverty. For example, sociologists and public policy leaders have suggested that "child poverty can be reduced by a combination of policies...[and] programs that provide benefits in the form of goods and services (such as food, housing, and health care) which are vital to children's well-being" (Children and Poverty, 1997). As these authors note, these policies and programs must be consistent with

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public beliefs, and in recent years, public support for welfare and food stamp programs has waned.

Mass media often shapes public opinion, and there is evidence that individuals' social behaviors and opinions are formed early. Developmental and social psychology research indicates that beliefs and value systems related to gender roles, pro-social behavior, and economic inequality develop through childhood (Dickinson, 1990; Eisenberg, 1995; Katz, 1983,1988; Leahy, 1981, 1983). As children begin to question the values of their parents and other significant adults, the media—including books—have a potentially powerful influence on their value systems (Campbell & Wirtenberg, 1980; Dickinson, 1990).

Children's books and their images of society have long been considered an influence on the thoughts and perceptions of the young reader. Previous work has examined children's books for their images with respect to race (Edmonds, 1986; Alexander, 1987; Monroe, 1988), gender (Nelson, 1991), and age (Odoms,1992). Most of these studies have relied on content analysis as a methodology because it allows for an objective and systematic evaluation of texts "according to a particular theoretical, political, sociological or psychological framework" (Short, 1995). Few studies exist, however, which examine poverty or economic concepts in books for children (see Chafel, Fitzgibbons, et al., 1997 for a review of these). According to Chafel, "one factor that has contributed to the persistence of poverty emanates from existing societal images that portray the economically deprived in negative ways *and limit policy on their behalf*" (1997, p. 432). Yet, it remains uncertain how accurately poverty is portrayed in these books and whether, as Campbell and Wirtenberg (1980), Machet (1993), and Chafel (1997) argue, inequalities are being perpetuated by these portrayals.

Questions and Conceptual Framework

This study seeks to answer the following general questions:

- What are the images of poverty found in contemporary realistic fiction for youth?
- Are these images consistent with findings from developmental psychological research on children's conceptions of economic inequality?

An earlier study (Chafel, Fitzgibbons, et al., 1997) analyzed eighteen contemporary realistic fiction picture books for children from preschool through third grade. The analysis considered nine demographic and sociological categories such as race/ethnicity, geographic setting, and occupation. This study found that the books presented poverty in a fairly realistic manner as compared to 1994 United States census figures. There were several limitations of this earlier study: the structure of the books allowed for limited exploration of poverty concepts, few books about poverty were available for this age level, and an analysis could not be carried out using a full conceptual framework such as that presented in the work of Leahy (1981; 1983).

Leahy's (1981; 1983) research investigating children's (ages 5-18) conceptions of economic inequality provides the analytic framework for the current study. Leahy found that as children mature their characterizations of economic inequality move from the concrete to the abstract. More specifically, their understanding evolves from peripheral conceptions (e.g., appearance, possessions) to psychological ideas (e.g., self-concept, values) and then to

sociological conceptions (e.g., life chances, class consciousness). These three main categories—peripheral, central (psychological), and sociological—along with demographic factors, serve as the framework for analyzing the content of the books in this study. (See Appendix A for a further description of this framework.)

Methodology

Many more books are published than are readily accessible to youth due to the selective nature of most collections of juvenile literature in school and public libraries. For this reason, a comprehensive list of books with relevant subject headings was not chosen from *Children's Books in Print* or a similar source. Instead, works of contemporary realistic fiction for grades 5 through 12 published since 1979 with poverty as a central theme were identified through subject listings in basic and specialized selection sources (e.g., *Middle and Junior High School Catalog*, *Adolescents at Risk*), as well as from articles and bibliographies in journals. (See Appendix B for a complete list of selection sources.) This approach insured that the books met criteria of quality, popularity, and usefulness.

From the resulting list of approximately 60 titles, a sample of twenty books was selected to reflect the diversity of potential poverty-related factors such as geographic setting and race/ethnicity. (See Appendix C for a complete list of titles in the sample.) Of these twenty titles, twelve were published in the 1990s and eight were published between 1979 and 1989. Using selection sources, the age of the main character, and professional judgment, thirteen books were deemed most appropriate for middle and junior high readers, while the remaining seven titles were considered most appropriate for senior high readers. Of these seven titles, only two were considered potentially inappropriate for middle and junior high readers due to language and sexuality. Twelve titles had male central characters, six had female central characters, and two books had equally prominent male and female characters.

The two researchers read and analyzed in common six titles in order to establish consistent and reliable use of the coding scheme. One researcher read all twenty titles and analyzed an additional eleven titles on her own; the second researcher analyzed an additional three titles on her own. There will be formal inter-rater reliability checks in the second stage of the study when an additional twenty books from the initial list as well as a group of books from the 1970s will be analyzed.

Findings

Demographics

In this study, fourteen books portrayed white characters in poverty, four had Hispanic characters, one had a Native American character, and one had an African-American character.

In terms of the numbers of white and non-white characters, these figure are somewhat comparable to the data in the Chafel, Fitzgibbons, et al. (1997) study. In neither study were there Asian-American characters present. Since approximately half of those persons living in poverty in the United States are white (Blank, 1997), figures from both of these studies are

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fairly representative of those found in real life. The sample from the current study fails to reflect, however, the disproportionately large number of people of color who live in poverty compared to the number of non-Hispanic white persons who do (Blank, 1997).

Since more than 26% of African-Americans live in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 1997), the limited presence of African-American characters in the sample is surprising. In reviewing an earlier book list generated for this study, it is evident that many of the books about African-Americans living in poverty were published in the 1970s. Perhaps fewer books with African-American characters are being written or perhaps authors are trying to more fully depict African-American's lives. Conversely, it was surprising that so many Hispanic characters were present in the sample since articles have addressed the issue of the lack of Hispanic characters in literature for youth even though they are the fastest growing minority in the United States (Barry, 1998).

In examining family structure found in the books in the sample, six portrayed two-parent families (30%), seven had single-parent families (six single mothers, one single father) (30%), and seven (35%) had no parents due to death or abandonment. These figures are inconsistent with figures for single mothers heading poor families which indicate that this group makes up 60% of those living in poverty in the United States (Blank, 1997). Chafel, Fitzgibbons, et al., (1997) found a slightly higher, but still inaccurate, proportion of single mothers (40%) in their sample. The sample more accurately reflects reality in terms of the number of two-parent families, which make up about 35% of those living in poverty (Blank, 1997). The number of books in this sample in which characters have no parents is particularly disproportionate. This could be a plot device to enhance the tension in the books; the resulting image, however, is stereotypical, not accurate.

Determining geographic settings for the sample titles was a challenge because of vague descriptions provided by the authors as well as the transient nature of the characters' existences. Generally, there were more urban settings (eight books, 40%), than small town (six books, 30%) or rural (two books, 10%) settings. In four books (20%), characters live in vehicles, traveling frequently, or shift often between temporary hotels, the street, and homeless shelters. While the figures for urban areas are consistent with current figures (United States Census Bureau, 1997), the sample inaccurately represents the number of persons living in rural and small town settings—only 24.6% of persons living in poverty in the United States (Blank, 1997). Instead, the number of rural and small town characters in the sample mirrors the 1970 poverty demographic much more closely (Blank, 1997). The books in the sample fail to situate any of their characters in suburban areas, although 32.6% of persons living in poverty reside in the suburbs (Blank, 1997).

Images of Poverty

Using the coding framework derived from Leahy (1983), an analysis of the images of poverty in these initial twenty books demonstrates that images in the peripheral category account for, on average, 70% of the poverty images in each book. The peripheral category contains subcategories such as physical appearance, residence, health and nutrition, and family life, all of which are tangible indicators of characters' lives in poverty. This dependence on tangible images to portray poverty is perhaps not surprising since, from an

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authorial perspective, filling in details of characters' everyday lives and circumstances is perhaps easier than describing their psychological conflicts or sociological beliefs. Unfortunately, such a dependence on tangible aspects of living also tends to prohibit an extensive discussion of other variables relevant to poverty that might support young readers' growing awareness of and action on social issues (Katz, 1988).

Of the peripheral subcategories, the health and nutrition subcategory accounts for an average of 15% of the poverty images presented. Many of these references are to food, descriptions of what was eaten as well as to the scarcity of it. Sanitation and hygiene issues are also frequently noted in these books. Certainly this attention to images of health and hygiene is not unexpected since food is one of the basic needs for survival that is often compromised in impoverished conditions. Similarly, the references to health and hygiene issues reflect a variety of poverty indicators such as living conditions, available income, and reliance on social welfare services.

The other most frequently represented peripheral subcategory is money; this category represents on average 10% of the images of poverty portrayed in the sample. To some extent, the fact that money is the second, not the most highly, portrayed poverty image is surprising since poverty itself is defined in terms of money and income. In the sample, money is frequently depicted in terms of its insufficiency to meet current needs or as a precious commodity, where even a seemingly small amount is regarded with awe.

It is interesting to note that in only one book is there any explicit mention of banking or bank accounts; however, in several books characters save money on their own for purchases or to help provide for their families.

One of the prominent images drawn from the peripheral category is that of reading. In many of the books analyzed for this study, characters are shown engaged in reading as one of their principal activities and pastimes. For example, in *Maniac Magee*, Maniac is seldom seen without a book in his hand, and on several occasions he finds solace in the public library. Likewise, in *Monkey Island*, Clay is an avid reader whose favorite book is *Robinson Crusoe*; in *Shiloh*, David is a comic book fan; in *Mary Wolf*, books carry Mary far away from her troubles; in *Tex*, Tex frequently settles back to read something about horses; and in *Secret City, U.S.A.*, Willie broadens his world by reading the newspaper. Not only, however, do characters read for pleasure, but they also engage in reading to others or in helping others learn to read. For instance, in *Cloud Dancer*, Eileen frequently reads the sports pages from the newspaper to her brother Neal, Maniac helps his older illiterate friend Grayson learn to read, and in *Make Lemonade*, LaVaughn reads to Jolly's children and helps tutor Jolly in reading, writing, and related school work.

Central, or psychological, images of poverty account for an average of 20% of the poverty images in each book. This category contains subcategories for morality, values, self-esteem, and emotional state that serve as indicators of the characters' responses to their conditions of poverty. According to research by Leahy and others, it is these sorts of indicators, reactions, and awareness that young people begin to bring to bear on issues of social and economic inequality at around the middle school level, developing more fully through high school. Although there were only four subcategories to represent these psychological images (as opposed to ten subcategories for the peripheral group), one might conclude that authors may

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not be reflecting adequately the developmental level or needs of their audience as they portray characters in poverty in young adult books.

Of the central subcategories, the two most frequently depicted are self-esteem and emotional state, each accounting for an average of 7% of the poverty images portrayed. Often, characters display signs of poor self-concept or of feeling defeated or insignificant because of their economic circumstances. Other times, characters seem to work deliberately hard to convince themselves of their worth. Unlike self-esteem, emotional reactions are portrayed more one-sidedly, frequently (and perhaps, realistically) showing anger, frustration, and disappointment instead of happiness, acceptance, and optimism.

Sociological images of poverty constitute an average of 10% of the depictions of poverty in the sample. Life chances, class consciousness, political power, and prestige are the four subcategories that constitute how the characters view poverty's effects on their lives and opportunities, especially in relation to people of differing economic statuses. These four subcategories, though sparsely represented in the sample, represent some of the most powerful images of poverty, giving young readers opportunities to see how their fictional contemporaries struggle to manage and change their lots in life. Of course, some characters are ashamed and frustrated by their circumstances. Disregard for public assistance as well as for people of higher economic classes is relatively common in the books.

Of the twenty books analyzed in this study, only one book, *Make Lemonade*, provides examples from each of the eighteen coding categories; *Tex* and *You're Dead, David Borelli* had instances of seventeen of the eighteen categories. Most books provided a more limited or narrow view of what it means to live in poverty. Political power and prestige were the least frequently used categories, found in only three and four books respectively, reflecting the lack of emphasis on sociological descriptions. The fact that examples of work were found in only eleven books would be, somewhat surprising except that the coding focused primarily on the central characters, almost all of whom were under the age of eighteen when getting a job is more expected. The four categories in which instances were found in each of the twenty books were all peripheral subcategories: activities and pastimes, residence, material possessions, and health and nutrition. Again, the emphasis of the books in this sample seems to be on tangible, easily represented images of poverty; yet, the examples of central (psychological) and sociological categories remain powerful images and potential targets for discussion among young adults.

Emerging Themes

Though this content analysis has been primarily deductive rather than inductive, a number of important and relevant themes related to poverty have become apparent in the first twenty books. The themes, including homelessness and criminality/violence, do not fit neatly into the coding framework in large measure because these themes, like poverty, are evidenced by a variety of factors. These themes are important to the discussion of images of poverty because in many of these twenty books they loom as both causes and consequences of poverty.

Homelessness is one of the most prevalent themes in these initial books and in many peoples' minds, homelessness remains perhaps the most extreme example of life in poverty. In nine

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of the twenty books examined in this study, a central character is homeless for at least a portion of the book. For example, in *Monkey Island*, *Street Family*, and *Maniac Magee*, the main characters are completely on their own—no families, no homes—although these characters find some haven and comfort with other homeless people. The characters in *Outside Looking In*, *Come the Morning*, and *Mary Wolf*, unlike those noted above, have families who share in their struggles, while the characters in *Lupita Manana* and *Secret City, U.S.A.* have families who are unable to give their children assistance.

Violence is another prevalent theme in the initial sample of books. In some instances, violence is a risk associated with being homeless (e.g., *Monkey Island*, *Street People*, *Maniac Magee*). In other instances, violence is a both a threat and a fact of life resulting from living in impoverished areas where public protection may be less available (e.g., *Make Lemonade*, *The Secret of Two Brothers*, *Secret City, U.S.A.*). In yet other instances, violence results from the frustration and anger of living in poverty (e.g., *Mary Wolf*, *Outside Looking In*). The notion of people in poverty as victims of crime and violence is consistent with statistics which indicate that low-income persons are substantially more likely to be victims of crime than high income persons (Blank, 1997).

Conclusion

The new *Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning* (AASL/AECT, 1998) emphasizes the importance of teaching students to critically analyze and use information from a variety of sources, including fiction, in order to work with others and to participate proactively in a democratic society. As noted previously, literature has the potential to influence the developing belief systems of the children and adolescents who read it. Consequently, the books that form the sample for this study may have the capacity to affect young people's understanding of poverty as well as to effect their reactions to this pervasive condition. Teachers and school librarians/library media specialists, as the facilitators of students' critical use of information, are then key players in making this possible.

One way teachers and library media specialists can make good use of these books is as starting points for engaging students in active discussion and meaningful inquiry. For example, teachers and library specialists can help students explore the images in these books and how they compare with what they know and learn about their own communities, classmates, and experiences. Similarly, students could compare the images in these books with the more limited and stereotypical images of life in poverty that are presented in television and the movies (Blank, 1997). These discussions or inquiries might spur or culminate in an authentic learning activity where students work with other students, their schools, their families, and community leaders to inform others about poverty or to effect change in some particular aspect of poverty locally.

Other possible uses of these works of fiction are as the basis for a social justice curriculum or in reader-response activities. In his model curriculum on homelessness, a theme related to poverty, Lewis (1996) suggests that fiction is essential in helping students develop knowledge of opposing value systems. Hutchison (1993) suggests that fiction on homelessness can also serve as a useful foundation for reader-response because it encourages students to reflect on ideas and values that may be unfamiliar to them. It is this dissonance

created by these students' confrontation with ideas about poverty and inequality that are different from the ones they hold which drives the students' growth and development (Leahy, 1981, 1983).

For the fourteen million children under the age of eighteen who live in poverty in the United States, the images of poverty presented in this initial sample of twenty books are likely to be all too real. For the remaining 60 million children in this age group, these images present them with a rare opportunity to experience, albeit vicariously, the hunger, filth, shame, and hopelessness—as well as the elation experienced with a good meal, a safe bed, and a promise of something better—that are part of the poverty experience. There is room for improving the range and balance of poverty images presented in realistic fiction for youth so that more abstract images that spur students' cognitive and social development are present. However, the books that were analyzed as part of the study form a useful *base* from which educators can draw to assist all students in understanding life in poverty provided that the use of these books is augmented with additional resources, thoughtful guidance, and reflective activities.

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Appendix A: Coding Categories Adapted from Leahy (1981; 1983)

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Peripheral	External, observable qualities or surroundings of the central character **which are not demographic characteristics** and which are presented explicitly or implicitly in the text
• Physical appearance	The central character's physical features and appearance of clothing which are not demographic characteristics
• Activities and past-times	Hobbies, past-times, leisure activities, or other non-labor-related activities in which the central character engages
• Neighborhood and community	Geographic or social environment in which the central character resides
• Residence	The central character's living quarters
• Material possessions	Items, owned or borrowed, in the possession of the central character
• Health and nutrition	Descriptions of the central character's diet, nutrition, personal hygiene, and health conditions
• Work	Descriptions of the central character's for-pay activities
• Education	Descriptions of the central character's school life
• Money	Descriptions of the central character's absence or presence of money and related purchasing/saving decisions
• Family life	Non-demographic descriptions of the central character's family life
Central	Psychological traits or qualities of the central character which may be presented explicitly or implicitly in the text
• Morals/Religion	Ideas and actions concerning ethics, moral dilemmas and choices, and religion held by the central character
• Values	Ideas about the purpose of life, work ethic, value of education, etc. held by the central character
• Self-esteem	The self-esteem or self-worth held by the central character or other characters' estimation of this
• Emotional state	The general emotional state (i.e. happiness, sadness, anger, etc.) expressed by the central character
Sociological	Conceptions of class held by the central character which are presented explicitly or implicitly in the text
• Life chances	The central character's quality of life or opportunities which are explicitly claimed as consequences of wealth or poverty
• Class consciousness	Conflicts between the central character and persons of different economic classes; central character's recognition of differences among economic classes.
• Political power	The central character's influence on society or government which is contingent on economic class position
• Prestige	Level of respect given to the central character which is contingent on economic class position
Demographic	
• Age	Age of the central character
• Race/Ethnicity	Race or ethnic background of the central character
• Location	Where the central character lives
• Family Structure	Structure of the central character's family (e.g. head of household, siblings, extended family)

Appendix B: Selection Sources

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Appendix C: Complete List of Titles

(Bullets indicate titles that are part of the preliminary analysis.)

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